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State panel sets hearing on mercury

By ADELLA HARDING - Staff Writer

ELKO — Nevada's State Environmental Commission is deciding Wednesday whether to approve the state's first proposed regulations for mercury emissions.

The hearing is at 10 a.m. at the Washoe County Commission Chambers in Reno. The regulations would replace a voluntary program to reduce mercury air emissions at major mining operations.

Nevada Division of Environmental Protection will be presenting the proposed regulations the agency revised after public meetings in Elko and Reno, and after considering public comment.

"We will be making a presentation. We think we have a solid proposal," NDEP spokesman Dante Pistone said today. "The proposed regulations make sure mercury reduction is done at the known sources."

Environmentalists in Idaho and Utah have been saying they believe mercury in fish in certain bodies of water in their states came from Nevada gold mines.

"We don't believe that's been proven at this point. There is a huge global pool, and mercury can travel great distances," Pistone said. "We don't feel it's right to make specific claims at this point without scientific research to base them on."

Elyssa Rosen, a senior policy analysts for Great Basin Mine Watch, a Nevada-based environmental organization, said today a major scientific study would cost "major dollars" and take years, but that doesn't mean what's known now should be ignored.

"Rationally, it makes sense to conclude that the best thing is to curb emissions," she said.

Rosen also said she believes the state needs to put a cap on the amount of mercury emissions allowed, but NDEP is not proposing any specific goal or cap.

Rosen said NDEP didn't post the final draft regulations until last Friday, which doesn't give people much time to review it.

"Given the time frame, it would be a wise and worthy decision to give this process more time," Rosen said.

And she said understands there will be people coming to the hearing from Idaho and Utah.

The new regulations would require more monitoring, more testing, improved emission controls and

more reporting to the regulators, and they include permitting and enforcement processes for all mines that might emit mercury.

The major mines reduced their mercury emissions after forming the voluntary program with the support of NDEP and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Queenstake Resources Ltd., Newmont Mining Corp., Barrick Goldstrike Mines Inc. and Placer Dome Inc. reduced emissions 75 percent from the original 1998 figures of 13,153 pounds of mercury to 4,488 pounds in 2003, according to EPA's toxic release inventory.

NDEP has posted the final version on the Internet at <http://ndep.nv.gov/mercury/index.htm>.

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